The World of Foreign Books

LITERARY NEWS FROM RUSSIA.

Surveyed by AVRAHM YARMOLINSKY.

AMONG the works which have seen the light of day in Russia since the beginning of the social revolution few reflect the spirit of the times more vividly than does a curious piece of dramatic writing by Vladimir Mayakovsky. True, it mirrors the glowing mood of the hopeful days of the upheaval rather than the disillusioned sobriety of the more recent period. The drama, which is in verse, is a cross between an opera-bouffe and an old mystery play, with all the extravagance of the former and all the crudities of the latter, touched with burlesque and couched in the forceful vulgar idiom which the author affects. Its title is simply "Mystery Play-Bouffe," its subtitle reading "a heroic, epic and satirical picture of our time," in three acts.

The Second Deluge.

The curtain rises upon a scene representing "the whole universe." Against the light of the aurora borealis there is the globe, its latitudes and longitudes marked by ropes. These serve as ladders down which clamber the last of mankind, wrecked by the storms of successive revolutions. Seven couples, "The Clean Ones," come down. These include representatives of the higher classes and representatives of the different nations as such. There are among others a merchant, a priest, a student, an army officer, an Abyssinian Negus and a Turkish Pasha. They do not understand what has happened to them, but they do know that it is necessary to devise some means for saving themselves. They put their first hopes in America, but they soon learn that America too is drowned. Like the survivors of the original catastrophe, they decide, at the merchant's suggestion, to build an ark. Enter seven couples of proletarians, the "Unclean Ones," explaining that they are of no nation and that "Labor is our country." At first the Clean Ones refuse to allow the Unclean Ones to share in the building of the ark, but their own helplessness forces them into a pact with the workers and the curtain falls to the scund of hammers.

The Hungry Clean.

The second act opens with the Unclean Ones feasting at the hold upon their catch of fish, while the Clean are sad and hungry. They are the clever ones, however, and so they elect the Negus as Czar and force the others to serve him. The Czar, like a true autocrat, devours the state revenue without any help, so the monarchists make a political revolution and set up a democratic republic. This, however fails to improve matters for the workers, who declare:

First it was one leech that sucked us;
now it's a platoon we feed.
The Republic is a Czar whose hundred
mouths all make us bleed.

And so they make a social revolution and cast all the Clean overboard. Alone on the ark, they find themselves cold, hungry and wretched, but like a *deus ex machina* the Spirit of the Revolution comes to encourage them. They set out in quest of the promised land, which they attain in the third scene of the last act.

The Last Act.

The first scene of that act takes place in hell. The devils show their hospitality by inviting the Unclean to enjoy fire and brimstone. But these are all undaunted, and hold forth to the effect that all the tricks of hell are nothing compared to what one finds on earth:

You, like an uncultured Turk,
Stick a sinner upon a pike.
But on Earth it's a different affair:
There is culture—there are machines.

The devils are all ears. But after the Unclean have told them a bit about the details of a life where machines use men instead of men using tools, the devils cry: "Enough! You make our wool stand on end."

The Destruction of Paradise.

The party passes through hell safely and reaches paradise in the next scene. This is a milk and water sort of place, where the pious drink tea without sugar, and bored angels occupy themselves by embroidering J. C. on the corners of clouds. The Unclean strongly disapprove of this paradise. They find it to be the same hungry, idle place which they have known upon earth. The heaven which Mayakovsky paints and which his heroes refuse is much the same as Conan Doyle's heaven. Not having Conan Doyle to call to account they destroy the paradise itself. They shout:

Away with it!
This institution is not for the likes of us.

Finally the argonauts reach the promised land. One of them climbs up a ladder and spies it out. At first he is struck dumb, and when he finds voice he bursts forth:

Give me, oh! give me, a tongue a hundred miles long,
Bright as a ray of sun and clear as a song.
Not a drooping rag, but a lovely lyre,
Swung like a bell by jewelers, higher and higher.
And every word out of my mouth be a flying nightingale;
But even then if I tried to say what I see I'd fail.

The wonders of the land are great:

Here sweet labor won't callous your palms.
Work blooms like a rose in your hand.
Down there a gardener works for years
Under hot glass roofs, handling manure;
But here, on the roots of parsley
Six times a year pineapples grow.

In this paradise:

A tree blooms
Not with blossoms, but with buns.
Yes, buns.
A sugar woman!
Two more!
Things of all kinds walk about:
Eats. . . .
Goods. . . .
Everything has a handle;
Everything has legs.

The Unclean, fascinated by this description, are about to break through the gates when they open, and Things walk hospitably toward them. Loaves, Sugar, Saws, Axes, Books. These beg the workers' pardon for having enslaved them on earth. Men and Things make a pact: "We shall make you and you will feed us." The curtain falls on a closeup of Things and Men in a cordial embrace.

This play was actually produced in several cities and had a measure of success.

The Return to Realism.

The emotion that inspired this work of Mayakovsky's and similar productions could not endure through the black years of civil war and famine and through the cold bleak labors which reconstruction in Russia entails. If we turn to current imaginative writing, we find for the most part the painful and the pathetic predominating. Here there is a return to the national literary tradition of fearless realism. This writing assumes the shape of fragmentary records and simple sketches of human figures and situations. Naturally, such brief and scattered pieces are not likely to appear in any permanent form. Until recently the newspaper was their only place. Of late months, however, several new magazines have sprung up, whose pages offer hospitality to the small host of fiction writers.

The revival of the magazines is one of the characteristic and hopeful features of present day literary life in Russia. Before the revolution the serious author, be he poet or economist, had at hand a ready medium of publication in the several solid and substantial monthlies known as the "fat journals." With the political upheaval and the economic collapse these succumbed, one after the other. Indeed, even the technical and scientific journals went under. In subsequent years several of them tried to lift up their heads in exile, with the result that at present two large Russian magazines are published, one in Paris, the other in Prague. It was only last year that Russia proper saw the appearance of a number of general periodicals and some special reviews.

A Russian Magazine.

The nearest approach to the old type of Russian magazine is *The Red Virgin Soil*, a "literary, artistic, scientific and publicist journal," appearing, it says on the cover, once every two months—but in reality a moveable feast. The title page bears the sacramental phrase: "Proletarians of all lands, unite!" and the imprint of the State publishing house. It is issued by the Chief Council for Political Education. It is here that one finds in its broader aspects the outlook of official Russia. The contributors to the politico-economic section include Lenine Bukharin, Radek, Pokrovsky. Yet it must be remembered that the magazine is a publication of a general character and in its encyclopedic range gives a large place to fiction. Here one finds new names attached to narratives dealing with harsh actualities. These tales do not show any traces of idealization of the new forms of life or of official optimism. Another large periodical publication issued in Moscow is *The Press and the Revolution*. This magazine is devoted to problems of book production and consists mainly of reviews of the current literature in Russia and partly abroad, written from the Communist angle.

The first issue opens with a paper by Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Education, who is one of its editors. While the Government recognizes in principle the freedom of literary expression, he argues, it is nevertheless resolved to check by means of a rigorous censorship those manifestations of art which are inimical to the aims and purposes of the regime. The same issue contains a documented account of the activities of the State Publishing House, which has been the chief publishing agency in Russia. Some of the figures cited are very illuminating. In 1920 Russia consumed 2,500,000 pounds of paper, that is, only some 8 per cent. of the amount consumed in 1914. In 1921 the situation was even worse. At the same time the productivity of labor in the printing trades fell to one-third of what it had been before the war. In 1920 the State Publishing House printed 908 titles of books and magazines, an aggregate of some 55,000,000 copies.

Periodicals in Petrograd.

Moscow does not have a monopoly of magazines; there are also several which have been started in Petrograd. Here, too, there is a crop of young writers, but one is likely to see the old familiar faces among the contributors to such new periodicals as *The House of the Arts*, the *Notes of Dreamers*, *Beginnings*, and the bulletin of the House of Men of Letters. The bias is toward arts and letters, politics being taboo among men who are inclined to view the new regime with a jaundiced eye.

The resumption of scientific journals remains a pious hope. Only one medical journal drags along a precarious existence. Historical research has been perhaps most fortunate. Several reviews have been started for the purpose of printing the findings in the State archives, which are being busily explored. The Commission for the History of the October Revolution and the Russian Communist Party issues a review of its own. *Works and Days* is a historical journal of a more general nature. The Main Archives of the Republic issue a valuable series of newly discovered documents relating to the history of Russian literature and social thought. The first fascicule contains hitherto unpublished material by Dostoyevsky, to wit, three chapters from "The Possessed" deleted by the editor of the Russian magazine where the novel originally appeared, and also the outline of an unwritten novel, "The Life of a Great Sinner." Dostoyevsky intended to devote six years of life to this, which was to be his last novel, his final pronouncement. In size it was to equal Tolstoi's "War and Peace." It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this find.

Applied Psychology

THE WAY TO WILL POWER. By Henry Hazlitt. E. P. Dutton & Co.

THE ART OF THINKING. By T. Sharper Knowlson. Thomas Y. Crowell Company.

THE OPEN ROAD TO MIND TRAINING. By Esme Wingfield-Stratford. Thomas Y. Crowell Company.

THE flood of books with such titles as the above that has come from the press in the last few years, together with courses, lectures and pamphlets on salesmanship and "applied psychology" that have become almost commonplace, testifies to a growing popular interest in understanding more thoroughly our mental processes, at least so far as necessary more fully to cash in on them.

There is always a danger in such a demand. For popularizers arise who are more adroit than scientific, more capable in putting pseudo-principles into alluringly simple terms than in translating the somewhat limited supply of available knowledge into non-technical language. They are more likely than the scholar also to assume as ascertained what is not surely known; the ignorant always have greater faith in knowledge than those who really know. One cannot observe announcements promising complete culture to any one who will spend fifteen minutes a day reading a certain shelf of books without thinking of the bitter disillusionment in store for the gullible.

Mr. Hazlitt, on the contrary, makes no rash promises, offers no short cuts to psychic success. The way to will power is long and hard, and he at no time disguises the fact. He devotes a chapter to careful emphasis on the necessity for "paying the price." The book is written in a simple, every day, almost chatty style. It is doubtful whether any one could put into 159 pages any more sound, suggestive introductory discussion of the problems of practical psychology than Mr. Hazlitt has done. A paragraph on courage is worth quoting:

> What can it profit a man to be able to think if he does not dare to? One must have the courage to go where the mind leads, no matter how startling the conclusion, how shattering, how much it may hurt oneself or a particular class, no matter how unfashionable or how obnoxious it may at first seem. This may require the courage to stand against the whole world. Great is the man who has that courage, for he indeed has achieved will power.

Mr. Hazlitt takes issue with the Freudians, considering that their emphasis upon the dangers of repression of the sex impulse is far out of proportion to the needs of the case. Indeed, he contends that this type of desire is largely acquired and can be controlled, in the average person, as far as total abstinence without any special harm. After all, civilization is to a great extent built upon habitual repression of certain instincts.

It seems strange that the apparently widespread curiosity on the subject has not led to greater study of William James, who of all psychologists has managed to express himself in terms readily comprehensible to the layman. James disliked special vocabularies and thought they often impeded rather than aided clarity and exactness of thought. His "Principles of Psychology," "The Energies of Men" and "The Will to Believe" are unequaled as introductory texts by any of the writings designed especially for the business man in his off hours.

It is the chief merit of Mr. Knowlson's book that he recognizes the inadequacy of cursory snatches of the science and repeatedly urges his readers to go further into the subject by use of a well chosen bibliography.

Mr. Wingfield-Stratford has written a concise and suggestive outline of methods of training the mental faculties into habits of careful thought. He too takes a fling at the Freudians, not without ample reason.

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